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A Rock and a Hard Place

Michael Fuller ponders Pierre Audi's Tristan und Isolde in Amsterdam

Tristan und Isolde. Stephen Gould (Tristan), Ricarda Merbeth (Isolde), Iain Paterson (Kurwenal), Michelle Breedt (Brangäne), Günther Groissböck (King Mark), Andrew Rees (Melot), Martin Pikorski (Young Sailor), Morschi Franz (Shepherd), Roger Smeets (Steersman); chorus of De Nationale Opera, Nederlands Philharmonisch Orkest/Marc Albrecht; Pierre Audi (director), Christof Hetzer (designer/ costumes), Jean Kalman (lighting), Anna Bertsch (video), Willem Bruls (dramaturg). De Nationale Opera, Amsterdam, 10 February 2018.

Pierre Audi, long-serving director of the Dutch National Opera, has previously staged the *Ring* cycle (1997-99), *Parsifal* (2012) and *Lohengrin* (2014) in Amsterdam. To these he now adds *Tristan und Isolde*, in a production which has already been seen at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées and at the Teatro dell'Opera di Roma. It shares with its predecessors an abstract, timeless stage presentation with an attention to detail in the presentation and direction of the characters, which together make for a compelling dramatic experience.

All three acts unfold against a plain rear screen, lit mostly white but varying to subtle shades of green and blue to suit the moment. As the prelude begins, a black square hangs in front of this screen. This is raised into the flies as four tall wooden screens on trolleys, plain on one side and panelled on the other, move across the stage. At the end of the prelude Tristan and Isolde appear in silhouette, recreating the moment later described by Isolde in which her hand – holding a notched sword – falls instead of taking revenge on the 'Tantris' whom this sword has allowed her to identify as the slayer of her lover.

The Young Steersman (impeccably sung by Martin Piskorski) delivers his lines offstage, as subsequently does the chorus. The wooden screens continually reconfigure the stage space, to generate successively an open deck, an enclosed ship's cabin, and so on. The panels support abstract projections at various times, for example evoking 'Kornwalls grünen Strand'. Their constant movement (executed with a laudable lack of stage noise) also effectively communicates that sense of a physical journey which underpins the first act of *Tristan*. The potion-casket for which Isolde calls is a folded cloth containing what appear to be mineral specimens – iron pyrites and a large black flint, the latter corresponding to the potion shared by the protagonists towards the close of the act (they each in turn rest their foreheads on it, before collapsing: an indication, perhaps, that the effects of the 'potion' are as much cerebral as visceral). Eight extras appear at various times, representing initially sailors going about their duties, and then King Mark's retinue at the end of the act. In this capacity they accompany two figures who again appear initially in silhouette, one hunched over a crutch and the other towering above him: an initial ambiguity regarding which of them is 'Kornwall's müden König' is resolved as the latter stands before Isolde and reaches out to her at the instant before a blackout ends the act.

For Act II the staging consists of tall pieces of windblown wood, the ribs perhaps of a decayed boat (continuing the nautical theme of the first Act). In the middle of these stands a large black obelisk, recalling the potion-stone, now literally central to and dominating the action that unfolds in this act. (This focus on an outsized talismanic object recalls the treatment of Klingsor's mirror in Act II of Audi's staging of *Parsifal*.) The hunting-party is seen departing at the beginning of the act, and subtle lighting changes then accompany the scene between Isolde and Brangane, the arrival of Tristan, and the love duet (which includes the *Tagesgespräch*). Green lighting over the wooden ribs for the duet generates an appropriately bucolic effect. A near-blackout accompanies Brangäne's off-stage warning,

during which a black cloth covering the obelisk is removed, leaving an open, polyhedral metal frame. As the lovers are interrupted by Marke and his retinue, the stooped figure with a crutch is revealed to be Melot: despite Isolde's attempt to stand between him and Tristan at the conclusion of the act, Melot reaches around her and stabs Tristan with a dagger.

The set for Act III consists of a wood-framed black box with a pinhole in its rear, with a tall, leafless tree (reminiscent of Caspar David Friedrich's 'Oak Tree in the Snow') to its left, and a high bier supporting a shrouded body to its right. Small rocks litter the stage, one of them – black and multifaceted – serving again as a reminder of the potion-stone, first for Tristan, and later for Isolde. After his exertions, Tristan expires in front of the central black box, where he is joined by Isolde before a black screen descends and hides them from view. Kurwenal not only kills Melot but also stabs Brangäne, who subsequently expires after delivering her final lines: 'Hier wüthet der Tod', indeed. For Isolde's transfiguration the screen in front of the box is raised, revealing it now to be glowing white. Isolde, within it, appears as a soft silhouette behind a scrim, at the conclusion of her outpourings turning and walking slowly towards the source of the light behind her.

Costumes are vague and timeless robes and coats, grey in the first act, black in the second, green and khaki in the third (Kurwenal, unkempt in the first act, appeared quite dapper in the last, clearly preferring the country life of Kareol to that of a royal ambassador).

If there is an overarching theme in this staging, it is perhaps impermanence, decay and dissolution: the constantly-moving panels of the ship in Act I giving way to the bare ribs in Act II, the solid obelisk in the second act being transformed into a skeletal outline, the shrouded body in Act III recalling a Tibetan 'sky burial', Isolde's transfiguration being accompanied by the blurring of her physical features. These themes of course resonate with the libretto ('Nicht mehr Tristan/ Nicht mehr Isolde'), and echo the ways in which *Tristan und Isolde* was inspired by Wagner's reading of Schopenhauer. But this may be too limited a

reading of the images Audi sets before his audience. More to the point is that they are never inappropriate, they provoke thought, and they do not intrude upon the music.

Stephen Gould repeated his familiar, tireless Tristan, rising magnificently to the challenges of the hero's third-act ravings. If this is not the subtlest of interpretations, one can only be grateful for so secure and generous a rendering of this role. Ricarda Merbeth first sang Isolde in Turin last year. On this occasion she gave a terrific account of her Act I narration, and a beautiful evocation of Frau Minne in Act II. She cannot command the same level of decibels as Gould, and it was noticeable that he often sang towards the side of the stage during parts of the Act II duet to enable a good balance between their voices to be achieved; but since these lovers barely touched one another this was no intrusion into the overall *konzept*. Merbeth's intonation was not always faultless in the third act, but she gave an accomplished *Liebestod*. Günther Groissböck commanded the stage in his appearances as King Mark. He may lack the weighty bass instrument of some interpreters of this role, but his smooth delivery and youthful appearance served to intensify his incomprehension at his betrayal in Act II, and the nobility of his compassion in Act III. Iain Paterson's Kurwenal was rather rough-hewn in the first Act, but he sang warmly and smoothly in the third. Michelle Breedt was initially a slightly matronly Brangäne, but interacted well with Merbeth in Act II and floated her offstage Warning beautifully.

The performance was a triumph for the orchestra under Marc Albrecht, who produced a highly accomplished rendering of this score – precise yet passionate, surging and throbbing as the drama demanded, occasionally overwhelming the singers but underpinning the drama beautifully. The wild storms of which Isolde sings at the beginning of Act I, and the murmuring springs at the beginning of Act II, were both memorably conjured up by Albrecht. The blending of orchestral voices was beautifully judged throughout, and the playing of the woodwind in particular was exceptional. Albrecht brought cor anglais player

Nieke Schouten onstage to take well-deserved a bow at the end of Act III: the gorgeously sonorous bass clarinet of Herman Draaisma also shone out in King Mark's Act II soliloquy.

As a work of art, *Tristan und Isolde* is an attempt to give concrete and permanent form to a psychological and spiritual state of disaggregation and impermanence. Finding visual representations of this inherent contradiction between the form and content of Wagner's masterpiece is inevitably a huge challenge. Audi's symbolic abstractions may not be the last word on the matter, but they offer a sustained and intelligent response to the problems which staging Wagner's lyric drama inevitably brings.